

The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War. By Jeremy A. Yellen. Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 2019. xii, 286 pages. \$45.00.

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In late April 1997, the *Asahi shinbun* published a series of conversations between former Japanese Prime Ministers Nakasone Yasuhiro and Miyazawa Kiichi. The statesmen agreed on many issues but remained divided on the 1946 constitution. Miyazawa assessed it as a force for good even though it did not emerge from the will of the Japanese people. Nakasone did not dismiss it but felt that Japan had lost its “independence.” Therefore he wanted to try and redraft the nation’s own constitution.¹ The debate was supposed to focus on contemporary Japan but the discussions kept turning back to Japan’s war in Asia, which influenced how the leaders viewed the postwar. Was the nature of Japan’s postwar constitution reflective of its past or indicative of a peaceful future? After the Abe Shinzō administration stepped down after almost eight years in power, the current push for constitutional reform continues to remain pertinent.

Most contemporary political discussions in Japan still pivot on an assessment of the character of the war and Japan’s empire, so Jeremy Yellen’s book arrives at a propitious time. He leads us on a behind-the-scenes tour of the scaffolding that the Japanese employed in their imperial construction of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Yellen’s book opens with the 1937 China Incident. The imperial general headquarters-government liaison conference was created in November 1937, as the army marched toward Nanjing, so it is an apt beginning. It is fitting, as Tomoko Akami explains, because the idea of “equality and independence of colonies from European powers” grew to be “a significant strategic matter for the Allied forces and Japan, for both needed the cooperation of China and other colonies.” This shift to gain support propelled the Japanese to further define “its war ideology, the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.”²

Yellen describes in his deep empirical analysis, showing mastery of the archival record in Japan and the long stretch of Japanese secondary scholarship, how Japan was attempting to shape its own new world order. There

1. “Nakasone Yasuhiro, Miyazawa Kiichi-shi, tokubetsu taidan, kenpō 50nen: 1,” *Asahi shinbun*, April 22, 1997.

2. Tomoko Akami, *Internationalizing the Pacific: The United States, Japan and the Institute of Pacific Relations in War and Peace, 1919–45* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 267.

are four schools of thought on the sphere as he sees it: (1) the Kobayashi Hideo school which sees the sphere as starting with the Manchurian Incident in 1931 and then evolving in Japan's push for industrialization and self-sufficiency; (2) the revisionists who see the sphere in an uncritical and congratulatory light as the zenith of Japan's holy war and efforts to liberate Asia; (3) an ideological third school, which sees it as an outgrowth of pan-Asianism and imperialism as an ideological mission containing fascist and neo-Confucian elements all at once; and (4) those who hold that the sphere was an abortive vision of the future.

Building on research examined in *The Japanese Wartime Empire, 1931–1945*, Yellen takes a more in-depth approach to examine the interactive nature of the sphere in Southeast Asia. By 1942, Japanese rule over 350 million people stretched almost from the Aleutian Islands to India.³ Japanese hegemony was, of course, more illusory than actual but we cannot ignore its impact. In this vein, Yellen embarks on the prior journey that Louise Young analyzed in her description of Manchuria as a key element for Japan's launch of total empire.⁴ However, historians in mainland China have depicted Manchukuo as a "fake" empire, not worthy of analysis. Yamamuro Shin'ichi cautions us in his autopsy of the region that we need to take care when assessing Japan's imperial periphery because to merely label it as a puppet erases our chances of understanding its complicated legacy.⁵

In Yellen's analysis, the sphere was a hybrid construction of both fantastical conjecture and practical realpolitik to preserve a space for imperial Japan in an expanding world war. Japanese ideologues saw the sphere as colonial and anticolonial at the same time (p. 20). Japan was pro-German and anticommunist. As German forces ransacked Europe, Japan asked the Nazis for assurances about European colonies in East Asia. Nazi diplomats waffled in their responses. At this time, Japan was pushing toward the South Pacific (Nanyō) and concerned about imperial stability. Japanese leaders aimed to cut off U.S. and French aid to Chiang Kai-shek pouring in through the Indochina-China border to alleviate pressure on the Japanese army bogged down on the continent. The Japanese army and foreign ministry saw aligning with Germany as the best way to preserve the potential of Japan's future colonies in Southeast Asia, and this was linked to Japan's continued domination of China.

3. Peter Duus, Ramon H. Myers, and Mark Peattie, eds., *The Japanese Wartime Empire, 1931–1945* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

4. Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

5. Yamamuro Shin'ichi, *Manchuria under Japanese Dominion*, trans. Joshua A. Fogel (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

Prince Konoë Fumimaro had already announced the formation of empire in 1938, but his return to lead a cabinet in July 1940 pushed for further gains in Southeast Asia. In Yellen's estimation, Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke's August 1940 radio broadcast announcing that the sphere would replace the new order in East Asia was Japan's way of informing Germany that Japan's position in the region was preeminent. The sphere thus played two roles—proclaiming dominion over what would become the loss of European colonial hegemony in East Asia and announcing to the colonies themselves that they would now have equal standing in the world. Yellen paints Japan's Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke as central to the sphere's evolution. He fell from grace in July 1941 so the actual vibrant life of the sphere ended up being short-lived, but his ideas thrived and transformed into Japan's own imperial *raison d'être*, using the sphere ideal to sustain self-existence and self-defense.

The delicious banquet that Yellen serves up is the complex and at times completely incongruous definition of the sphere. He writes that Japanese leaders did not even plan for empire properly. As Aaron Moore notes, Japanese soldiers in Southeast Asia “were unaccustomed to the jungle and consequently suffered . . . their feet were covered in burning fungal infections, and tainted water gave rise to many virulent diseases.”⁶

Because Japanese civilian and military leadership only thought about what to do after the war began, they did not implement the war with a concrete vision. Indicative of this, Yellen explains, was the example of the Navy's intelligence division whose assembled academics were unable to articulate what the sphere actually was (p. 78). A Greater East Asian Ministry was created in late 1942 but war rendered it little more than paperwork. Yellen concludes that leaders “failed to consider *how* Japan could gain legitimacy while instituting its regional hegemony” (p. 99).

Takashi Fujitani highlighted in his work that we can compare the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the Atlantic Charter. At their core, both empires—Japan and the United States—were racist, although both vigorously denied this racism and announced they were there to liberate.⁷ Churchill had no plans to release British colonies, and Tokyo Imperial University professor Kamikawa Hikomatsu “contended that the Atlantic Charter established an international society in which the wolves ruled the sheep.” Freedom and equality, he said, was only for the wolves to enjoy (p. 161).

6. Aaron William Moore, *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 203.

7. Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 8.

Yellen's details provide a new opportunity to assess the sphere; it did not fall completely on deaf ears. Leaders in Manila and Rangoon had multiple reasons to link with Japan and "their collaboration was not a simple expression of political opportunism or self-interest" (p. 137). As Sharon Chamberlain details in a new book about war crimes trials in the Philippines, President Elpidio Quirino granted pardons to collaborators and Japanese war criminals at the same time in 1953 because the issues were so intertwined.⁸ The United States had already promised independence to the Philippines by the late 1930s, but Yellen notes that "Japan did not attack with visions of long-term colonization." Filipino elites openly gave Japan support but the archipelago was also the site of concerted guerrilla destabilization efforts. The sphere was riddled with contradictions (pp. 116–18). By contrast, the war in Burma "presented nationalists with a golden opportunity to seize independence" (p. 139). The Burmese were impressed at how quickly Japanese overcame British forces in Singapore. Yellen's savvy take is that Southeast Asian leaders used alliances to "build up functioning foreign policy establishment," "to gain experience in diplomatic affairs," and with the unintended consequences of training talented military men, which impacted later postcolonial forms of governance (pp. 190–203).

As the war turned sour, particularly from early 1943, "the tension between recognizing the futility of war and seeking something meaningful in the deaths has remained an unresolved dilemma," as Akiko Hashimoto writes.⁹ Did the sphere provide a galvanizing force for public opinion to advance in the face of continued defeats? It is, of course, hard to fathom given the extreme censorship in place in Japan at that time. In October 1943, students began to be mobilized, demonstrating that the war was not going as planned. At the same time, as David Earhart details, the sphere also offered a new visuality of modernity for imperial propaganda. Maps glorified new trainlines from Japan through Korea and Manchukuo, all the way down to Singapore. Japan sought to level the playing field of equality in Asia through infrastructure.¹⁰

The sphere is probably mostly remembered for its November 1943 conference that gathered 46 members of the elite from seven Asian countries. Here, Yellen exposes one of the long-standing problems of Japan's imperial project—they fundamentally could not explain it to outsiders. That made it virtually impenetrable to international comprehension because it

8. Sharon Chamberlain, *A Reckoning: Philippine Trials of Japanese War Criminals* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), p. 17.

9. Akiko Hashimoto, *The Long Defeat: Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 55.

10. David Earhart, *Certain Victory: Images of World War II in the Japanese Media* (Armonk NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2008), pp. 291–92.

was never universalist in nature. From the conference, Japan produced the Pacific Charter, which was seen as a counterweight to the Atlantic Charter. Japan now called on peripheral regimes to play a role in the new world order, something increasingly important as the war situation deteriorated. Ironically, these leaders who assembled at this conference were reunited in Sugamo Prison in 1946 as inmates. Ba Maw, Jose Laurel, and Thein Maung were all incarcerated there along with the Japanese leadership (p. 205).

There are limits to what an author can include in a richly textured investigation such as Yellen provides; he cannot be faulted for ignoring the precursors to relations at the imperial periphery, as David Ambaras detailed in his recent work.¹¹ Nor do we get a picture of the sphere as champion of infrastructure innovation as highlighted in Bill Steele's research.¹² These two examples emphasize first the need to observe the preconditions necessary for launching of the sphere and that the sphere left a physical legacy as well as an intellectual one within the framework of Japan's former empire.

Yellen is perhaps on the same page as Benjamin Stora, scholar of Algeria's war with its colonial overlord France, who points out that letting go of Algeria was always more difficult within the setup of the imperial French mindset because Algeria was officially a department of the French state, not a colony or some other secondary holding. I pondered this when considering what Yellen offers us. Did the Co-Prosperty Sphere slip into the dustbin of history for most Japanese due to defeat or to the fact that the sphere was never part of the Japanese *naichi*, the formal colonial structure. Yellen carefully offers insight into this conundrum and has turned the spotlight back on the Co-Prosperty Sphere, pushing us to rethink what Japan was trying to achieve in its empire.

11. David Ambaras, *Japan's Imperial Underworlds: Intimate Encounters at the Borders of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

12. M. William Steele, "Roads, Bridges, Tunnels and Empire: Highway Construction and the Great East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere," *Asian Cultural Studies*, No. 42 (2016), pp. 87–101.